

#YALICHAT: Wanjira Mathai Connects with the YALI Network on Climate Change

From November 17 to 19, YALI Network Online Course instructor and director of wPOWER hub Wanjira Mathai held a YALICHAT to answer questions from YALI Network members. One of the common themes addressed throughout the chat was how individual citizens can make an impact for good in their communities.

“Raising public awareness about the climate crisis and giving local communities practical actions they can take to mitigate and adapt is crucial — water harvesting, food security, tree planting are but a few,” Mathai says. “Young people should be encouraged to plant trees in school, at home, at church. We want to create a culture of planting trees so that we do it because we know it is important for us. A national tree planting week would be a great idea; ideally, when schools are closed (say around Easter). Public tree planting is great in that it will build solidarity nationwide. Tree planting is an everyday affair: When you are happy, plant a tree!”

One of the main concerns for YALI Network members was the role the government plays in addressing the problem at hand: While citizens of each country can do their part, governments should promote clean energy solutions and encourage industries to do the same.

“What many governments want to believe is that economic growth and clean energy are incompatible,” Mathai says. “They are compatible. In fact, some of the world’s economic leaders are prioritizing clean energy because they know it will be good for people, planet and profit — the triple bottom line.”

Governments are beginning to implement solutions to improve air quality. New Delhi, for example, is creating an organized mass transit system to encourage people to use public transit more frequently.

“I was impressed when I visited New Delhi recently and heard that the government just got tough on emissions,” Mathai says. “Some of the interventions they introduced included public awareness campaigns around health impacts of air pollution and pollution checks to ensure that only road-worthy vehicles are on their roads.”

Network members were particularly interested in deforestation. According to Mathai, at a practical level, destroying forests has short-term benefits but serious long-term consequences.

“We have to begin to see all these impacts from a systems perspective. When we destroy our forests and landscapes, we destroy their ability to support life and replenish rivers and underground aquifers. We are told by the U.N. that we need a forest cover minimum of 10 percent for sustainable development. Most of our countries have decimated our forests with little or no reforestation taking place. The function these forests used to play is stopped, and so the services it provided cease. So floods and famines (which become droughts) have become more frequent.”

In addition to discussing the role the government plays, another concern addressed in the chat centered around the issue of clean water. According to Voice of America’s Straight Talk Africa, 350 million to 600 million people in Africa are projected to be exposed to water stress due to climate

change.

“For most of our countries, restoring the degraded landscapes and riverine forests with indigenous vegetation is an important investment,” Mathai says. “In the meantime, we must work on ways of harvesting water when it rains. We must find ways to harvest the water from our roofs, particularly in agricultural areas where it can be used during the dry season, and also learn techniques for in situ water harvesting. There is a lot we can learn from countries like Israel and projects like we have seen in Ethiopia (watch “Ethiopia Rising”) where terraces, check dams, gabions and many other water harvesting techniques have been employed in addition to tree planting and farmer-managed natural regeneration of trees.”

We protect what we care about. In order for action to be taken, something has to be at stake. Here is some advice straight from Mathai to the YALI Network on how to speak to your community about climate change:

“The best way to explain climate change to others is to engage them in activities that demonstrate what it means and also take them to beautiful places that they might experience environmental beauty. You know the saying: “We protect what we love.”
